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Making and Keeping New Year's Resolutions

Psychologists Offer Tips to Strengthen Willpower

Atlanta, GA, January 14, 2015 — When it comes to New Year's resolutions, willpower plays a huge part. It is not surprising that many resolutions focus on making lifestyle changes such as exercising more frequently or eating a healthier diet since 45% of Georgians live with at least one chronic illness.

Willpower is tested every day, whether it is hitting the snooze button rather than going for an early morning run or choosing an apple over a cupcake at lunchtime. The decisions that lead to a healthier life are often difficult, and the American Psychological Association's annual [Stress in America survey](#) has revealed over the years that not having enough willpower was the top reason people cited for being unable to make healthy lifestyle changes.

The 2013 survey found 53 percent of respondents said being physically active or fit is very or extremely important to them, yet only 29 percent say they are doing an excellent or very good job at it. In reality, people don't always achieve their goals, and APA's Stress in America survey showed that in the past five years, the majority of adults have tried to make a behavior change and many are still trying.

Part of the explanation for this may be that people struggle with having enough willpower. Willpower is the ability to delay gratification, resisting short-term temptations in order to meet long-term goals. One reason adopting healthy behaviors may be so difficult is that resisting temptation can take a mental toll. In fact, some experts liken willpower to a muscle that can get fatigued from overuse. The good news is that, also like a muscle, willpower can be strengthened to help achieve lifestyle-related goals, such as eating healthy or losing weight.

Dr. Kip Matthews, an Athens, GA-based psychologist, believes it is important to understand that we only have so much energy to bring about change as well as live our daily lives. Dr. Matthews stated that "it is essential to selectively target our willpower

Advancing the profession of psychology in Georgia

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toward those activities which are our true priorities. By doing so, we can more effectively bring about change in a specific area of our life."

If you believe that a lack of willpower is holding you back from achieving healthy goals, there are techniques that can help strengthen self-control. Psychologists suggest the following tips for strengthening willpower:

- **Focus on one goal at a time:** Psychologists have found that it is more effective to focus on a single, clear and modest goal rather than attacking a list of goals at once or being too ambitious out of the gate. Succeeding at the first goal will free up willpower so it can then be devoted to the next goal. Focus on changing one health habit first, whether it's being more physically active during the week or eating smaller food portions daily.
- **Monitor your behavior toward your goal:** Research shows that people who track their daily food intake are more likely to succeed at weight loss. Don't let inevitable slip-ups derail progress. Make a reasonable plan to meet the goal and recommit each day to making progress toward that goal.
- **Seek support:** Research shows that having support systems can help people reach their goals. Being surrounded with friends and family who will be supportive of the goals, and willing to help, can make a big difference. If people feel overwhelmed or are unable to meet their goals on their own, they might want to consider seeking professional help. Psychologists are trained to help with behavioral and lifestyle changes. They can help address triggers that prompt people to make unhealthy choices, identify positive ways to change unhealthy habits and develop new skills and ways of thinking.

To learn more about willpower and mind/body health, visit www.apa.org/helpcenter and follow on Twitter at @APAHelpCenter. Also visit www.gapsychology.org for Georgia information.

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The American Psychological Association, in Washington, D.C., is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States. APA's membership includes more than 130,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students. Through its divisions in 54 subfields of psychology and affiliations with 60 state, territorial and Canadian provincial associations, APA works to advance the creation, communication and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people's lives.